

**And, Out of Class Too: The Who, What, When, Where, Why, and  
How of Students Learning Together Outside of Class**

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2013

## Abstract

Students studying together in class is widely advocated in the literature on teaching methodology. This paper provides a brief overview on the idea of students also studying together outside of class. The paper's structure is based on answering the 5W and 1H questions about Out-of-Class Academic Collaboration, i.e., who, what, when, where, why, and how. Nineteen references are provided from practical, research, and theoretical works.

## Introduction

A great deal of research already tells us that students can learn better in class when peer interaction is one of the ways they learn (Astin, 1993; Hmelo-Silver, Chinn, Chan, & O'Donnell, 2013; Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2001; Slavin, 1995). A great deal of learning theory - from behaviorism to cognitivism, from developmental psychology to socio-cultural theory – already helps explain the results of this research. And, a great deal of practical work already tells us ideas about how we can help college students successfully collaborate in class (Cuseo, 1996; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; and Millis & Cottell, 1998).

While most work on cooperation among college students focuses on classroom collaboration, this article explores peer collaboration for learning outside the classroom, i.e., what might be called Out-of-Class Academic Collaboration (OCAC). The 'reporters' questions of who, what, when, where, why, and how serve as an organizing device for the article, although the order of the questions has been somewhat rearranged.

## What Is OCAC?

OCAC involves students meeting outside of class to enhance the learning they are doing inside of class. It recognizes that "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (Astin, 1993, p. 398).

The word 'academic' is a key part of OCAC. Students get together outside class for many non-academic purposes, good or bad, e.g., sports, socializing, clubs, romance, and substance abuse. As Light concludes from his research on tertiary level learning:

All the specific findings point to, and illustrate, one main idea. It is that students who get the most out of college, who grow the most academically, and who are the happiest, organize their time to include interpersonal activities with faculty members, or with fellow students, built around substantive, academic work (1992, p. 6).

Three types of OCAC are:

1. Institutionally-sponsored OCAC. Examples include peer tutoring programs in which students are sometimes paid or otherwise rewarded to tutor other students. Such programs are often sponsored by the institution at which students are

studying, but other organizations, such as religious or ethnic organizations, also set up OCAC programs.

2. Teacher-initiated OCAC. For instance, instructors assign students to work together outside of class time on group projects.
3. Student-initiated OCAC. Groups of students get together on their own initiative to study.

These three types of OCAC sometimes overlap. For example, after collaborating on a teacher-initiated OCAC project, the same group of students might move on to do student-initiated OCAC.

### **Why do OCAC?**

If peer interaction aids learning inside the classroom, peer interaction outside the classroom should also enhance learning. Indeed, Bloom (1984) argues that peer interaction outside class time plays a key role in academic success. OCAC has been recommended for its value in many different educational contexts, e.g., disabled college students (Finn 1997), trainee teachers (Hawkey, 1995), graduate students in educational psychology in Thailand (George, 1999), and entering college students (Ignash, 1993).

Sokolove (1998) found that those biology students who studied together tended to earn higher exam scores at a US university. The Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) (<http://www.casa.susx.ac.uk/pal.html>) program at a UK university has reportedly provided students with support and helped reduce the stress of academic life. Support is also a key aim of what Johnson and Johnson (1999) call 'base groups.' These are groups of students who stay together for at least a year and, hopefully, much longer, meeting in and out of class to see how everyone is doing and to offer help and motivation.

Canagarajah (1999), working from a critical pedagogy perspective, looks at a particular form such support via OCAC can take. He describes how minority students at a US university used what he calls 'safe houses' to counter influences from the dominant culture. From these safe houses, students prepared themselves to make their voices heard on academic issues, thereby adding diversity and democracy to the life of the academy.

### **Who does OCAC?**

Treisman's work (1983) at a US university suggested to him that it was the more successful students who participated in OCAC. This might at first seem counter intuitive. Wouldn't it be the lower achieving students who would seek the help, while their higher achieving peers would be able to stand on their own? Perhaps, as suggested in the previous section of this article on Why Do OCAC, the higher achieving students reached that status in part because they used OCAC as a study strategy.

Research at two tertiary institutions in Singapore (Crookall, et al., 2000; Jacobs, et al., 2001; Lopez-Nerney, et al., 2001) found OCAC to be common among students, especially as project work was frequently used in their classes, although students also participated in OCAC even when it was not assigned. Project work represents just one exemplar of the larger trend in education toward encouraging collaboration. For instance, even distance education, once thought of as almost necessarily solitary, has seen greater peer collaboration being used (Millis, downloaded 10 April, 2002). Thus, the answer to the question of who does OCAC may soon be everyone.

### **Where Is OCAC Done?**

The research done in Singapore found tertiary students engaged in OCAC at a wide variety of sites. On campus, these included places specifically designated for OCAC, such as group study rooms in libraries, as well as study benches, dormitory rooms, empty classrooms, and cafeterias. Off campus, students favored meeting at each other's apartment buildings, in coffee shops, and restaurants.

The increased use of electronic communication means that OCAC need not be face-to-face. Paloff and Pratt (1999) describe a variety of ways that students can use computers and other electronic devices to communicate synchronously or asynchronously. For instance, Canagarajah's (1999) students used online collaboration as one form of virtual safe house. Ku, Tseng, and Akarasriworn (2013) and (Lin, 2013) provide other examples of what is currently being done in the way of electronic collaboration among college students.

### **How Can OCAC Be Promoted?**

The most important question has been saved for last. A flippant answer would be, "Don't worry, students have been doing OCAC for years and will continue to do so regardless of what their instructors say or do." For example, when George (1999) first encountered what she came to call 'homework cartels' among her students, her initial inclination was to label their activities as cheating until she saw their pedagogic value.

Below are five suggestions gleaned from the literature on how to promote OCAC. Clearly, more research and development needs to be done in this area.

#### **1. Make cooperation a value**

We live in a world where competition and individualism are often prized over cooperation. Such an environment does not advance OCAC. To promote cooperation as a value – not necessarily to the exclusion of alternative ways of viewing others, such as competing against others – instructors can look for examples in their own disciplines of where collaboration makes a difference, e.g., among wolves or among researchers in that discipline. Also, instructors can promote OCAC by describing their own experiences with collaboration as students or later, as well as the experiences of past students who have engaged in successful OCAC.

## 2. Provide input into group formation

The cooperative learning literature advocates heterogeneous groups for a variety of reasons, such as development of collaborative skills and attitudes, access to a broader range of perspectives, and establishment of bonds between students of different backgrounds. While some instructors decide for students who will be in which group, another way to have input in group formation is to explain the reasons for heterogeneous grouping and then allow students to form their own groups.

## 3. Build collaborative skills

While college students may be better at collaboration than their counterparts at earlier levels of education, reports of ineffective OCAC groups among college students are commonplace. Thus, time spent learning how to work together is likely to be time well-spent. This learning can be done in special courses, such as those on study skills, or as a brief part of regular courses.

## 4. Encourage colleges to provide more facilities for OCAC

Facilities for OCAC could be rooms reserved exclusively or at designated times of the day for OCAC. Such rooms could be equipped with hook-up points for laptops and other electronic devices.

## 5. Learn from OCAC

Canagarajah (1999) suggests asking students how in-class collaboration can benefit from incorporating lessons from successful out-of-class collaboration. By encouraging students to tell about and reflect on their OCAC experiences, instructors show that they value OCAC. Also, students can improve their own OCAC experiences by learning about what other OCAC groups have done. Besides asking students about their OCAC, instructors can also learn from OCAC by participating, with students' permission, in various types of electronic forums and in occasionally sitting in on face-to-face OCAC sessions, just as instructors listen in when students work together in class.

## References

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